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Jonathan Olson

THE QUEST FOR LEGITIMACY: AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLARS AND THE QUANDARIES OF ACADEMIC PURSUIT

INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLARSHIP FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the immediate wake of the 1906 Azusa Street revival, Pentecostal “saints” from around the country began to craft (both formally and informally) certain theological and ideological opinions that located them (both intentionally and inadvertently) on what many understood to be the fringes of the America’s professional academic community. Early Pentecostals anticipated the imminent return of Christ and, in so doing, invested little in the affairs of the “world,” including political reform and economic security. Education also fell to the wayside. Apart from a number of bible schools whose sole purpose was to instruct young Pentecostals in the ways of evangelism, missionizing, and church planting, most early “saints” viewed more formal instantiations of higher education (e.g. classic liberal arts training) as a waste of precious time at best, damaging to one’s spiritual vitality at worst. Imbedded in such a philosophy was not only an apocalyptic expectancy, but also a strong suspicion of the mind itself as a space easily occupied by diabolic forces; the mind was weak, carnal, and susceptible to the wiles of the devil. Thus, giving too much attention to one’s intellectual development through the acquisition of “human” knowledge was for many early

Pentecostals a dangerous prospect that threatened or at least distracted from the cultivation of greater spiritual empowerment, what many considered to be both a “safer” and more valuable alternative.

Class was also a factor. “Several were victims of abject poverty,” argues historian Robert Mapes Anderson. “Smith Wigglesworth and Frank Bartleman both described their families as ‘very poor.’” He goes on to note that another Pentecostal leader by the name of J. H. King “remembered his childhood as one of constant struggle and deprivation. His father, a tenant farmer with ‘no education, no money, no home and no horse,’ migrated frequently round about the South Carolina back country, dragging his wife and eleven children from one single-room log cabin to another.”¹ Not only does King’s personal account invoke a deep sense of privation, it also reveals the poor agrarian setting to which many early Pentecostal leaders were born. Most were raised on modest farms, where hard labor and diminutive returns were commonplace. This rather dismal assessment of early Pentecostal economic standing is certainly not without its detractors. Historian Grant Wacker, in his book *Heaven Below*, argues that they were much more diverse than Anderson suggests. He claims that those belonging to the movement were not impoverished but instead “represented a cross section of the American population.”² Only a minority were actually members of the lower class. Most, on the other hand, resembled average working-class Americans with the exception of a small group of affluent converts. Yet, in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially in the years during the Great Depression, corresponding to the national mean did not necessarily assure financial security. In fact, many early Pentecostals, though middle-class, suffered under the pressure of poor economic conditions. Even if Wacker’s theory is correct, we can still assume that the vast majority of early Pentecostals were anything but well-off. Under such fiscal restraints, few had either the time or

1. Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1979), 100.

2. Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 199.

resources to pursue the kind of formal learning that would satisfy normative definitions of scholarly training.

Changes began to occur in the late 1940s. From the ashes of the Second World War emerged a strong period of economic growth in the United States that affected all corners of society. Pentecostals were no exception. During this time, they experienced a significant amount of upward mobility that positioned them firmly in the rank and file of an expanding and increasingly-professionalized middle class. Moreover, many Pentecostals had become, by the mid-century mark, disenchanted with notions of an imminent return of Christ and thus began to invest more heavily in their “earthly” existence. For some this included the development of one’s intellect, no longer viewed as a bane to one’s spiritual fortitude but instead interpreted by many as a useful tool for furthering the cause of the Kingdom of God. With the ratification of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act in 1944 (more commonly known as the GI Bill) many young Pentecostal men began to weigh more seriously the option and benefits of a college education. To quell the demand, Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God established its first liberal arts school in 1955 known as Evangel College. Other denominations followed suit by either establishing liberal arts institutions or increasing the degree offerings and overall academic rigor of existing bible colleges. Adding to the growth in higher education, the Society for Pentecostal Studies was formed in 1970, which continues to serve as the movement’s premier academic organization. By the middle of that decade, the foundation of an American Pentecostal scholarly subculture was firmly in place.

Building on the advancements of prior generations, it appears that Pentecostal scholars today are beginning to make noticeable contributions to the wider fields of theology, church history, and biblical studies. Although many of these scholars still remain on the periphery of what many would consider America’s “Ivory Tower,” they form the backbone of a movement undergoing a visible intellectual growth spurt. In an effort to isolate the movement’s more formative players, a reputation survey was sent to 140 Pentecostal scholars from

around the country, followed by in-depth interviews with the thirteen names that appeared most frequently. What surfaced from this quantitative and qualitative data was a portrait of a subculture whose leading participants seem to occupy an interstitial space rife with apprehension and uncertainty, where each must negotiate how to pursue greater legitimacy in the larger academic community without somehow forfeiting a part of their Pentecostal identity. Yet, beyond such internal struggles lies a stratum of unique research, growing confidence, and a strong sense of optimism for the future of American Pentecostal scholarship or what sociologist Peter Berger would suggest is the beginnings of a new “plausibility structure” in which the label of “Pentecostal scholar” can exist as a viable and believable category.

QUANTITATIVE EXPLORATIONS: REPUTATION SURVEY

In early 2007, 140 Pentecostal scholars from around the nation received a brief survey.³ The questionnaire was divided into five parts. Part one asked respondents to list three of the *most well known* Pentecostal scholars. Part two asked respondents to list three of the *most “cutting edge”* Pentecostal scholars, and part three asked them to list three of the *most influential*. Part four asked respondents to list three *Pentecostal scholars whom they had read the most* and part five asked which three *non-Pentecostal Christian scholars they had read the most* (only recipients who classified their personal religious belief as “Pentecostal” were asked to respond to part five). Although the five parts of the survey were meant to offer unique perspectives, there was some overlap among the questions, as pointed out by some respondents who found it difficult to distinguish

3. These scholars were chosen to participate in the reputation survey because they belonged to biblical studies, theology, or religion departments at their respective institutions. Since the disciplines in which Pentecostals are making the most impact in the larger academic world, namely biblical studies, theology, and church history, fall within these departments, these scholars were in a position to provide the most informative data. If I had surveyed Pentecostals in the fields of science, business, medicine, or even the social sciences, there would have been very little continuity between their responses. Their chosen fields are so vastly different. Plus, most of the Pentecostals in these fields would have had little knowledge of Pentecostal scholarship and therefore would have been unable to provide me with any usable data.

between the first three categories (*most well-known, most “cutting edge,” most influential*). This, however, was not necessarily a problem because all five parts of the questionnaire were weighed equally.

The primary goal of the reputation survey was to generate a list of America’s leading Pentecostal scholars by polling individuals who would be in a position to provide the most informative data, Pentecostal scholars themselves. Specifically, 140 scholars received the survey, 51 (36%) responded, and out of the 51 respondents 45 (32%) provided data. This means that 6 (4%) people responded but chose, for several different reasons, not to complete the entire survey. Thus, the rank was produced from the data provided by the 45 who answered most, if not all, of the questionnaire. Table 1 illustrates the initial findings.

Table 1. The Fifteen Leading American Pentecostal Scholars.
Based on the number and percentage of respondents.

Name	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Amos Young	34	75%
Mel Robeck	27	60%
Frank Macchia	24	53%
Vinson Synan	22	48%
Gordon Fee	21	46%
Chris Thomas	12	26%
Grant Wacker	12	26%
Steven Land	12	26%
Veli-Matti Karkkainen	9	20%
Gary McGee	9	20%
Stanley Burgess	6	13%
Craig Keener	6	13%
Cheryl Bridges-Johns	6	13%
James K. A. Smith	6	13%

Although the preliminary ranking in Table 1 is useful, it is not necessarily the most accurate representation. For instance, a scholar who was mentioned once by several people may actually have fewer nominations than a scholar who was mentioned multiple times by fewer people. Thus, it was more accurate to

determine rank based on total number of nominations as the Table 2 demonstrates.

Table 2. The Fifteen Leading American Pentecostal Scholars.
Based on the total number of nominations.

Name	Number of Nominations
Amos Young	61
Mel Robeck	53
Frank Macchia	47
Gordon Fee	43
Vinson Synan	36
Chris Thomas	20
Grant Wacker	19
Steven Land	18
Veli-Matti Karkkainen	16
Gary McGee	12
Stanley Burgess	11
Miroslav Volf	11
Craig Keener	10
Cheryl Bridges-Johns	8
James K. A. Smith	7
Stanley Horton	7
Rick Moore	5

The results of the individual queries were just as revealing as the overall ranking itself. When asked to list the three most *well-known* Pentecostal scholars in the U. S., 22 (48%), named historian Vinson Synan, 20 (44%) mentioned historian Mel Robeck, and 19 (42%) respondents listed New Testament scholar Gordon Fee. These three scholars share two common characteristics: age and influence. Due to their longevity—all three are either in their sixties, seventies, or eighties—they have had a visible impact on the trajectory of American Pentecostal scholarship and have helped shaped the burgeoning subculture in unique and dynamic ways. For example, both Vinson Synan and Mel Robeck were among the first Pentecostal historians to research the beginnings of the movement with a level of objectivity respected by those in the larger academic

community, drawing innovative and in some cases controversial conclusions. In addition to being a prolific writer, Gordon Fee also has made an impact through his success in transporting Pentecostal biblical scholarship beyond the confines of the movement, enabling it to participate in broader academic conversations.

Although “well known,” Synan, Robeck, and Fee are not necessarily considered to be the most forward thinking. When asked about who they viewed as the most *cutting-edge* in their respective disciplines, 32 respondents (71%) nominated theologian Amos Yong, followed by theologian Frank Macchia with 15 nominations (33%), and Finnish-American theologian Veli-Matti Karkainen and philosopher/theologian James K. A. Smith tied with 6 nominations each (13%). What distinguishes these scholars is their willingness and even determination to transcend the customary theological and historical paradigms that have for decades dominated Pentecostal scholarship. Dynamic pneumatological approaches and ecumenical or even interfaith dialogue characterize much of their research.⁴ In the case of systematic theologian Amos Yong (who received more nominations in this category than the other three combined) involvement in Pentecostal-Buddhist dialogue, studies on pneumatology and science, and even research on the relationship between theology and physical disability are what mark his research as “cutting-edge.” Simply stated, the ability of Yong and some of his fellow scholars to stretch the boundaries of Pentecostal scholarship further than most of their colleagues gives them a certain respect within the Pentecostal scholarly community. To some extent, they even epitomize the movement’s scholarly emergence.

As a combination of the first two questions, the third question on the survey asked respondents to list whom they thought were the top three most

4. Pneumatology is an area of theological research broadly defined as the study of God in the form of the Holy Spirit. When applied to topics outside the realm of theological studies, pneumatology becomes a unique methodology that differentiates Pentecostal scholarship. For some concrete examples on the application of the pneumatological approach, see Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2003) and “Toward a Typology of ‘Spirit’ in the Religion and Science Dialogue,” *The Global Spiral*, October, 26, 2004, <http://www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/id/9140/Default.asp> (accessed April 10, 2008; discontinued link).

influential Pentecostal scholars. Not surprising, the lists generated by respondents corresponded with those already made. Of the top three, Mel Robeck came in first with 17 nominations (38%), Gordon Fee came in second with 15 nominations (34%), and Frank Macchia third with 13 nominations (34%). Also, both *cutting-edge* scholar Amos Yong and *well known* scholar Vinson Synan came in fourth and fifth, respectively. Likewise, question four asked recipients to list the top three Pentecostal scholars whose work they read the most. Based on the answers already given in the previous three questions, the names mentioned on this fourth question were not entirely surprising. With 12 nominations (27%) Amos Yong came in first, followed by Mel Robeck with 11 nominations (25%). In third place there was a tie between Gordon Fee and Chris Thomas, both with 10 nominations each (22%).

The fifth and final question on the reputation survey asked recipients to list three non-Pentecostal Christian scholars they read the most. This particular question was intended to trace the Pentecostal scholarly network beyond the boundaries of the movement itself, or in other words, to determine which scholars outside of Pentecostalism were/are influencing Pentecostal scholarship. Coming in first with 7 nominations (17%) was N. T. Wright. Second was a tie between Clark Pinnock and Mark Noll with 4 nominations each (10%) and there was a three-way tie for third place between Grant Wacker, Alister McGrath, and Harvey Cox with 3 nominations each (7%). The common denominator between these scholars is that they are all, with the exception of Cox, of the evangelical persuasion. This demonstrates that many Pentecostal scholars value and respect the work of evangelical scholars. It also suggests that many Pentecostal scholars are not looking beyond the scholarship of conservative Protestantism. It may be the case that they are comfortable with evangelical literature or are simply uncomfortable with the scholarship of mainline Protestants, Catholics, or the wider academy. Regardless of the specific reasons, it seems that many of today's Pentecostal academics are choosing to read the scholarship produced by their evangelical "kin" instead of the scholarship generated by those outside the conservative Protestant tradition. Consequently, this information demonstrates

the insular qualities of American Pentecostal scholarship, a dominant theme (among others) in the subsequent interviews.

QUALITATIVE EXPLORATIONS: PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

The queries on the reputation survey, although insightful, provided only limited data. Composing a thicker description of the American Pentecostal scholarly subculture demanded the use of more qualitative methods. Using the survey's ranking system, personal interviews were conducted with many of the nation's leading Pentecostal scholars. The purpose of each interview was twofold: to collect information regarding each scholar, namely his or her upbringing, academic journey, and current situation and to extract each scholar's perspective on the state of Pentecostal scholarship in general. The interviews began with some preliminary information such as the participants full name, job title, and age. Although the age-range between the youngest and the oldest scholar was quite significant, most were in their forties, fifties, or sixties, with an average age of 54. As far as disciplinary affiliation was concerned, five were theologians or philosophers, four were biblical scholars, four were church historians, and three were heavily involved in ecumenical studies. Another common denominator among these thirteen scholars was that they all taught at conservative Protestant institutions, ranging from liberal arts colleges to theological seminaries, with the exception of historian Grant Wacker who currently teaches at the historically-Methodist school, Duke University. Even though virtually all taught at conservative Protestant institutions, only half of the scholars interviewed (seven out of the thirteen) taught at Pentecostal-charismatic affiliated schools such as Regent University, the Church of God Theological Seminary, Vanguard University, and the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary. The other half were connected to institutions that are welcoming to Pentecostals and charismatic Christians but are not overtly affiliated with the tradition. These schools consist of places such as Fuller Theological Seminary, Palmer Theological Seminary, Azusa Pacific University, and Calvin College. This cursory information (like their reading preferences) indicates that the

Pentecostal scholarly community, although burgeoning, is still quite localized.

The majority of the thirteen scholars agreed. “The limitations [of American Pentecostal scholarship], overwhelmingly, are its parochialism and fear of engaging the external academic world,” claimed Grant Wacker. He continued:

I find that very, very sad and I don’t see that changing very rapidly. I think it’s changing, but very slowly. There is still a paucity of Pentecostals at the AAR or the American Historical Association. Pentecostals retreat into their own little sanctuary, the Society of Pentecostal Studies. It started off as an academic society and what I think it has become, instead, is a safe refuge for people who often don’t have courage to enter the larger academic world. Those are strong words, but I stand by them. I feel this very strongly and I am very distressed by it. Just to see the timidity of Pentecostals, it’s inexcusable, there is no reason to be timid.⁵

Wacker is not alone in his convictions. James K. A. Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College, criticized Pentecostal scholarship for being “sectarian, tribalistic, [and] enclavish,” while others suggested that it is limited in terms of academic discipline.⁶ Frank Macchia, Professor of Theology at Vanguard University, argued that biblical studies and practical ministry remain the only “appropriate” areas for investing one’s intellectual energies in many Pentecostal circles. Theologian Veli-Matti Karkkainen could not agree more when claimed that there is a penchant within the movement’s scholarship toward biblical studies and that there is an inherent lack of more conceptual or theoretical work.⁷

For some, these limitations have bred certain internal tensions that have, in turn, slowed the advancement of Pentecostal scholarship at large. Gary McGee, Distinguished Professor of Church History and Pentecostal Studies at the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, suggested that fighting over the origins of the Pentecostal movement has been a hindrance, while James K. A. Smith argued that there is too much bickering over trite issues. “We have a lot

5. Grant Wacker, interview by author, August 18, 2007.

6. James K. A. Smith, interview by author, March 9, 2007.

7. Veli-Matti Karkkainen, interview with author, April 26, 2007.

of baggage,” he noted. “We come from these hokie institutions and our conferences are still at [small colleges]. I think sometimes because of that, there is still a fair amount of weird in-fighting that happens in Pentecostal scholarship, so we lose energy on that, so we don’t have energy to be more outward looking.”⁸

External tensions have been equally troubling. During the interviews, fond recollections of early “Pentecostal” experiences were overshadowed, on occasion, by equally indelible memories of parental disapproval. For most of the thirteen scholars, their parents were members of the lower middle class. They were blue collar workers who, although lacking a formal education, labored hard to supply their families with the usual necessities. To illustrate, Gary McGee commented that his father had been a plaster and dry wall contractor who at most had a ninth-grade education. He also recalled his father’s suspicion of his career-path in historical studies. “There is no money in history,” McGee’s father told him.⁹ If the parents of these scholars were not members of the blue-collar work force, they were clergy, most often ordained in some Pentecostal denomination. Of the thirteen scholars interviewed, six grew up with parents or grandparents who were Pentecostal pastors or missionaries. In some cases, an upbringing with parents or grandparents in full-time ministry fostered an expectation that they become ministers themselves. For many “saints” it was the highest vocation one could achieve and anything less, even becoming a professional academic, was somewhat of a disappointment. Grant Wacker reminisced about such a struggle:

My parents strongly wanted me to become a minister and when I decided to become an academic they were both disappointed. I think my mother continued to be disappointed for the rest of her life. It’s probably true of a lot of people who are supposedly destined for the ministry; it doesn’t win the approval of their peers.¹⁰

For some American Pentecostal scholars parental attitudes toward aca-

8. Smith, 2007.

9. Gary McGee, interview by author, March 1, 2007.

10. Wacker, 2007.

demia became a palpable source of tension.

Adversity also came from other directions. While some experienced practical issues such as financial trouble and unemployment, others endured more emotional frustrations. Cheryl Bridges-Johns, Professor of Christian formation and discipleship at the Church of God Theological Seminary, recalled how she would routinely feel stigmatized as a Pentecostal in various academic settings:

I always felt like any [academic] meeting you go into if say you were Pentecostal they lowered your IQ ten points immediately. You develop this sixth sense of how people look at you and how they think about you, and they don't talk to you, and then you give your paper, and then everybody wants to talk to you, like, "Wow, I can't believe you can give a paper, that's amazing." I had a German come up to me once at a World Council meeting, [where] I gave a plenary session paper, and say, "That was a fine sermon but I wouldn't qualify it as an academic paper," and I said, "Well why?" and he went on and on about what I didn't do. You know, you get that kind of stuff.¹¹

Not only did such adversity come from those outside the movement, it also came from fellow Pentecostals who viewed these scholars with suspicion and even trepidation. Mel Robeck, a Professor of Church History and Ecumenics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Los Angeles, remembered the criticisms he received from administrative figures in the Assemblies of God for his rather controversial research:

I have even been told by my General Superintendent that he would have been happy for me to resign my credentials and I said to him basically, "Well you know the system and how it works and if you feel that strongly about taking my credentials you go ahead and do that, but at least we'll have a trial."¹²

Similarly, Stanley Horton recalled visiting a small Pentecostal congregation in Boston one Sunday morning while attending nearby Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The pastor was not entirely enthusiastic about having a scholar in the crowd: "He saw me come in and he spent the whole sermon

11. Cheryl Bridges-Johns, interview by author, March 10, 2007.

12. Mel Robeck, interview by author, March 9, 2007.

haranguing against higher education.”¹³ Tacit in these memories are feelings of “outsiderhood,” where one’s identity as either a scholar or Pentecostal immediately works to devalue the other.

To a large extent, the “incompatibility” between Pentecostalism and academia is rooted in the movement’s anti-intellectual stigma. When asked, over half of the scholars interviewed stated that this label was, indeed, warranted. While many admitted to Pentecostalism’s past anti-intellectual tendencies, most, however, looked toward the future with optimistic eyes. “I do think there is still an anti-intellectual strain within the Pentecostal movement that pervades the movement, but I think it’s changing,” said Frank Macchia. “I’m happy to say it’s changing. [However], I think it will be another generation, if the Lord tarries, that will be required before we see significant gains in this direction.”¹⁴ Likewise, New Testament scholar Craig Keener suggested that the anti-intellectual stigma of the past is slowly fading away. “I don’t think it is as anti-intellectual now as it used to be,” he remarked. “I think that we still have that heritage that we are dealing with and you can hear that in my own story, how that was a struggle for me. If it wasn’t for an intermediate generation of scholars . . . I wouldn’t have been able to do what I was able to do.”¹⁵

However, others argued that Pentecostal anti-intellectualism is nothing more than a misnomer. New Testament scholar Chris Thomas pointed out that Pentecostals have had a long history of establishing institutions of higher education. He also noted that some denominations within the movement seem to struggle with this stigma more than others. “I think it may be truer of some branches in the tradition,” Thomas said. “When I hear scholars in the AG talk, it sounds like they just got the crud kicked out of them.”¹⁶ Although Thomas was among the minority of scholars who disagreed with the anti-intellectual image of past generations, he was not necessarily alone. Historian Grant Wacker

13. Stanley Horton, interview by author, March 23, 2007.

14. Macchia, 2007.

15. Craig Keener, interview by author, April 7, 2007.

16. Chris Thomas, interview by author, March 9, 2007.

also suggested that early Pentecostals were not anti-intellectual but were simply at odds with more established forms of higher education.¹⁷ In a similar sense, both Stanley Horton and Gary McGee disagreed that Pentecostals were anti-intellectual but, instead, contended that the larger academic community was simply anti-supernatural.¹⁸

Regardless of what those interviewed thought about the movement's anti-intellectual past, the fact remains that such a heritage still haunts (to greater or lesser degrees) the movement's scholarly subculture. According to some, it has inhibited Pentecostal scholars from making any lasting impression on the larger academic world. Akin to Grant Wacker's previous accusation of "timidity," historian Mel Robeck noted that "right now [Pentecostal scholars] are not leaving much of a mark at all [on the broader academic community]."¹⁹ Robeck did, however, mention the names of a few individuals who were "leaving a mark": Amos Yong, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, Keith Warrington, Allen Anderson, and Gordon Fee. "It's a pretty small circle, to be honest with you," Robeck lamented. "Sometimes it is a bit depressing to me. I have invested thirty years of my life in the Society for Pentecostal Studies and I wish there were more scholars who were significant."²⁰ Old Testament scholar Rick Moore agreed, but with an important caveat. He suggested that Pentecostal scholars are not leaving a lasting impression, but went on to argue that such a legacy should not be their primary concern. "I really think our agenda ought to be to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," Moore noted. "I think we'll make a fatal mistake if we start trying to go after making an impact on the academic world. What impact did Moses have on Egypt? What impact did Paul have on Rome? I just think we ought to try to be faithful."²¹

Indeed, remaining "faithful" was foremost in the minds of some who feared

17. Wacker, 2007.

18. Horton, 2007.; McGee, 2007.

19. Robeck, 2007.

20. Robeck, 2007.

21. Rick Moore, interview by author, March 8, 2007.

that Pentecostal scholarship, and maybe the movement in general, was losing its unique Pentecostal identity. According to ninety-year-old scholar Stanley Horton, Pentecostal scholars today are disregarding many of the “distinctives” that made them Pentecostals in the first place, namely the doctrines of glossolalia and divine healing. “I don’t see the book of Acts in some people’s theology today,” Horton lamented.²² Chris Thomas agreed. He stated, “I think the bad stuff from my vantage point are people just content to be evangelicals who happen to be Pentecostals.”²³ While Wacker and Robeck suggested that Pentecostal scholars in general seem to lack the courage to engage the larger academic community, Horton and Thomas argued that Pentecostal scholars seem to lack the courage to be “true” Pentecostals.

Amid the frustrations and anxieties there exists a potent optimism. Grant Wacker referred to American Pentecostal scholarship as “vital, young, growing, and has the strengths of any adolescence,” while Pentecostal Latino studies scholar Arlene Sanchez-Walsh argued that it has “great potential.” She went on to note that the “future of Pentecostal scholarship is good” and that “Pentecostal scholarship is branching out of simply being denominational history, simply being theology; you’re getting ethicists, theologians, historians, so you’re getting people who are coming out of a lot of different disciplines.”²⁴ Like Wacker and Sanchez-Walsh, James K. A. Smith also commented on the potential of the movement’s scholarship, especially in terms of the younger generation of Pentecostal scholars to which he belongs:

There is a generation of scholars emerging who have done their PhDs in fairly mainstream institutions who know how things work in the broader academy, and are not just doing navel gazing scholarship. They want to talk to Pentecostals and they want to speak as Pentecostals.²⁵

Like Smith, Chris Thomas also envisioned a new generation of Pentecostal

22. Horton, 2007.

23. Thomas, 2007.

24. Wacker, 2007.; Arlene Sanchez-Walsh, interview by author, June 24, 2007.

25. Smith, 2007.

academics who would bring the movement's scholarship to a higher level:

I think we see a fourth generation emerging who don't have an inferiority complex about being Pentecostal, who have a generation of Pentecostal scholarship to build on, and who really are taking their place in the arena. The best Pentecostal scholarship is that kind of scholarship that is unapologetic. When we are figuring out what our own categories are and going at our work as Pentecostals and not being beholden to other people's categories.²⁶

Encouraged by the younger generations, both Smith and Thomas anticipate a future where the labels of "Pentecostal" and "scholar" are no longer interpreted by the larger society or by American Pentecostals as mutually exclusive identities. Spurred by a similar sense of optimism, some interviewees went so far as to suggest that such a transformation was already taking place. "The Pentecostal academy is influencing other researchers and so forth," wrote Gary McGee. "We are probably telling our story today more than we ever have before. There are lots of people in the academy and in churches around the world who want to know more about Pentecostals and what they believe."²⁷ He went on to affirm that "the Pentecostal academy today, limited as it may seem, is making its voice heard. Pentecostals are being invited into all sorts of contexts to speak, to present their story, or to interact on different things that would have been unthinkable thirty years ago."²⁸ In a similar fashion, Stanley Horton also suggested that Pentecostalism, as both a religious movement and a burgeoning scholarly subculture, is making its mark on the larger academic community. While conducting research in past decades, Horton found that most systematic theologians did not even mention the Holy Spirit or have at least one section on pneumatology. "That's changed," he remarked. "Due to the Pentecostal revival and due to the scholarship that we've developed, it's caught their attention."²⁹ In the end, most American Pentecostal scholars seem eager to inform the larger

26. Thomas, 2007.

27. McGee, 2007.

28. McGee, 2007.

29. Horton, 2007.

academic community and their fellow Pentecostals that they are, in the words of Craig Keener, “a legitimate voice.”³⁰ However, as the qualitative data in this section has suggested, the road to such legitimacy is not without its share of impediments, especially when it comes to the conflation of identities popularly construed as antithetical. Many American Pentecostal scholars continue to be viewed by those on the outside as not fully academic nor fully Pentecostal, while movement out of this liminal state is for some a terrifying prospect. It means the possibility of relinquishing an integral part of themselves that they may never be able to fully repossess. For Wacker the “timidity” of American Pentecostal scholars may still be “inexcusable,” but it is certainly understandable.

INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK: PETER BERGER’S “PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURE” AND THE AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLAR

In his ground-breaking book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Peter Berger explores the concept of plausibility and its relationship to the various realities to which religious institutions subscribe. Specifically, he argues that religious communities acquire a sense of “believability” through not only their own system of meanings but through the dialectical processes between that system and the organizing structures of the larger society. The “plausibility structure” forged in this dialectic comprises the foundation of reality for religious communities, serving as a framework that mediates and regulates what is and what cannot be understood as true and viable.

Within this paradigm, religious pluralism matters a great deal. According to Berger, it opens up spaces allowing for the emergence of a new, secularized view of reality that threatens the overall credibility of religious institutions. To put it another way, in a religiously pluralistic society (a label which Berger uses to characterize the United States) there exists a tension between the dominant social structures (defined by secularism) and religious communities who are at risk of losing their plausibility, especially when interacting with a larger world

30. Keener, 2007.

that does not share its own definition of reality. In such a social setting there are two appropriate responses: accommodation or resistance. Berger comments that the “difficulty of the accommodating posture, reorganizing an institution in order to make it ‘more relevant’ to the modern world,” is reduced to the single question, “How far should one go?” whereas those who subscribe to the posture of resistance, with its emphasis on “maintaining or revamping the institution so as to serve as a viable plausibility structure for reality-definitions that are not confirmed by the larger society,” must agonize over whether the “defenses” or “plausibilities” they actively build are strong enough to withstand the “undermining” operations of the dominant social structures.³¹ Simply stated, in a religiously pluralistic society, religious institutions experience a crisis of plausibility, which leads to a crisis of legitimacy that can only be rectified through either adaptation or further entrenchment.

In the past few decades, Berger’s theory of religion has undergone some intense scrutiny. Specifically, sociologists and historians of American religion (including Berger himself) have criticized his secularization thesis as nothing but wishful thinking and an inaccurate representation of contemporary American society. Despite these criticisms, Berger’s theory of plausibility structure remains a helpful paradigm for understanding the predicament of American Pentecostal scholars who aspire to be fully “academic” and fully “Pentecostal” at the same time.

To begin, their recent emergence into the mainstream academic world has produced a crisis of legitimacy not entirely unlike the experiences of religious communities whose plausibility structures have been weakened by religious pluralism. Like these communities, Pentecostal scholars today find themselves in the position of having to decide whether to accommodate or resist the dominant definitions of reality, where Pentecostalism and academia remain antithetical categories. As the interviews revealed, the decision is not simple nor is it uniform. For many, accommodation means greater legitimacy in the eyes

31. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 156.

of the larger academy, but it also means surrendering at least a vestige of their Pentecostal identity, if not in their eyes than in the eyes of many of their fellow “saints” who have chosen to resist the dominant social structures themselves. On the other hand, if today’s Pentecostal scholars choose the path of many fellow Pentecostals and resist the prevailing “realities” of the broader academic community (including its epistemologies, hermeneutics, and so on) they may be able to assist in the construction of a uniquely Pentecostal plausibility structure but at the expense of any intellectual legitimacy, at least in the eyes of the larger society. The recent emergence of American Pentecostal scholarship sheds light on the deep and complex tensions that exist between the postures of accommodation and resistance in Berger’s model. In the case of Pentecostal scholars, their past inability to navigate these tensions has given rise to a visible hesitation within the subculture that remains a source of frustration for many. However, where some see failure, others see opportunity. Although abounding in timidity, the subculture also abounds in optimism. As some intimated, American Pentecostal scholars are beginning to negotiate more effectively the relationship between accommodation and resistance through a mutual commitment to both academic rigor and religious conviction. Moreover, it is possible that through these processes of negotiation, American Pentecostal scholars are beginning to construct their own plausibility structure in which the identities of “professional academic” and “Pentecostal believer” coexist with little or no friction. We see the evidence of this building process in the language theologian Frank Macchia who claimed that American Pentecostals are beginning “to develop a . . . heritage,” in which “intellectual pursuit” is “cherished . . . as a spiritual gifting.”³² Or to reiterate the words of Chris Thomas, Pentecostal scholars are, for the first time, “figuring out” their “own categories” and are no longer “beholden” to the “categories” of others.³³ If indeed such a structure is taking shape, it is doing so out of a multi-dimensional, dialectic process between the reality-definitions of American Pentecostal scholars and the reality-definitions that govern both the

32. Macchia, 2007.

33. Thomas, 2007.

American Pentecostal community and those that govern the larger American society.

CONCLUSION: THE QUANDARIES OF AMERICAN PENTECOSTAL SCHOLARSHIP IN BROADER PERSPECTIVE

Through the dynamic research of some its leading figures, the American Pentecostal scholarly subculture is beginning to penetrate the nation's intellectual marketplace in new and unprecedented ways. Yet, such engagement is not without its costs. Attempts to bridge the long-standing Pentecostal/academic dichotomy has led to internal questions of identity and legitimacy that seem just as difficult to answer, as they are to pose in the first place. The external struggles are equally apparent. Many have experienced at least some form of denigration from those in the wider academy who doubt their intellectual rigor, and ironically have encountered a similar scorn from some of their fellow Pentecostals who question their commitment to the charismatic faith.

Such quandaries are by no means limited to Pentecostal scholars. Professional academics in the wider evangelical world have faced similar dilemmas. In the post-war era, American evangelicals began to construct an elaborate intellectual subculture comprised of academic societies, refereed journals, and publishing houses. Similar to Pentecostals, this subculture offered an alternative to "secular" academia, in which "born-again" Christian scholars could present and publish their research in an amicable environment. As sociologist Alan Wolfe argues, by the early 1960s "conservative Christians with roots in American fundamentalism [had] created a life of the mind broader and more imaginative than anything previously found in their tradition."³⁴ Yet, many non-evangelicals in the wider academy remained unconvinced. Some, like historian Richard Hofstadter, upheld the notion that evangelicalism carried with it an inherent anti-intellectualism that not only disqualified them from "real" academic conversation—conversation based on an epistemology of scientific

34. Alan Wolfe, "A Welcome Revival of Religion in the Academy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (September 19, 1997): 6–7.

empiricism—but also had a damaging effect on American society at large.³⁵

Evangelical scholars looking to extend their voice beyond the parameters of the evangelical scholarly subculture met, and in some cases continue to meet, certain forms of resistance or have been at least received with an unspoken skepticism. As Pentecostal scholars have begun to discover and what many in the broader evangelical community already know, the anti-intellectual stigma is difficult to shed. On the other end of the spectrum, a sizable portion of modern evangelicals (especially those in the middle and lower classes, which includes many Pentecostals) tend to hold populist sentiments in which professional academics, regardless of religious affiliation, are viewed as untrustworthy elites and are thus treated as outsiders. Similar to the experiences of the Pentecostal scholars discussed throughout this article, some scholars in the wider evangelical world (and even in certain Catholic and Mormon circles) are forced negotiate their way through an interstitial space wrought with tensions. The global considerations of this study are also worth mentioning. In the words of Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, Pentecostalism is “a religion made to travel, and it [seems] to lose nothing in the translation.”³⁶ At least when it comes to the movement’s recent academic expansion, such an observation appears to ring true. Not only are we witnessing a transformation in Pentecostal scholarship and higher education in the United States, but various Pentecostal communities throughout the world are also beginning to establish colleges, universities, and seminaries that are more “mainstream” in terms of their academic scruples. Indeed, historian Joel Carpenter goes so far as to say that “virtually anywhere in the world that a significant Pentecostal, charismatic, or other evangelical movement has taken root, it is now engaged in higher education beyond the training

35. See Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). For a similar criticism from an evangelical insider see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

36. Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, Pa.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 101–102.

of church workers.”³⁷ More and more, Pentecostal scholars aboard are thinking beyond the pragmatic topics of indigenous church planting and pastoral ministry, and are making strides in areas such as systematic theology and biblical criticism. Whether or not these scholars experience the same quandaries as their fellow “saints” in the States remains uncertain. What is clear is that Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity is growing rapidly throughout the global South (Asia, Africa, and South America) and according to historian Philip Jenkins it tends to be more theologically-conservative and supernatural in orientation than the movement’s manifestations in the West (Europe and North America).³⁸ It is quite possible, then, that the difficulties experienced by domestic Pentecostal scholars are only exacerbated at the global level, where the supposed gap between charismatic beliefs and practices and the epistemologies associated with the mainstream academy is likely viewed by those at both ends of the spectrum as even more impassable than in the American context. In the end, it appears that for Pentecostal scholars (regardless of geography) to succeed in cultivating a level of legitimacy in the eyes of their detractors, they must continue to find creative and innovative ways of navigating the mine field of stigmas that persists in limiting their impact on the wider academic and Pentecostal worlds.

37. Joel Carpenter, “New Evangelical Universities: Cogs in a World System, or Players in a New Game,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 20 (Summer 2003): 56.

38. Philip Jenkins, “The Next Christianity,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2002, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/10/the-next-christianity/2591> (23 May 2012); for a more robust version of his thesis see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).